DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 095 036 SO 007 646

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TITLE Condorcet and Authority: A Problem in Educational Theory.
PUB DATE 16 Apr 74
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (59th Chicago, Illinois, April 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Community Control; *Comparative Education; *Educational History; Educational Responsibility; *Educational Theories; Equal Education; Ethical Instruction; Moral Development; National Programs; Parent Responsibility; *Power Structure; *Public Education; School Responsibility
IDENTIFIERS Condorcet; France

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the challenges that Condorcet saw facing France and the ways he chose to respond to those challenges, thereby posing and resolving the problems of authority deriving from the state, the family, and the wisdom of enlightened men. Condorcet's design for a system of public schools was aimed at providing instruction for all French men, women, and children in order to educate them for citizenship and prepare them for the future. The intellectual control over what was to be taught would be exercised by enlightened men, and the power to select teachers was divided between enlightened men and heads of households. This system would have enabled the French people to use the financial resources of the state while relying on the intellectual authority of enlightened men and moral authority of the family. Integral to the plan was the separation of instruction, the teaching of specific skills such as reading, writing, and reasoning, from education, the moral and manual training that could be provided by a family. In the course of the Revolution, the National Convention adopted other education plans which replaced the moral authority of the church with that of the state rather than the family. (Author/JH)

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"Condorcet and Authority: A Problem in Educational Theory"

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for the AERA, April 16, 1974

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The Marquis de Condorcet, who was born in 1743 and died in 1794, is perhaps best known for his prophetic "Esquisse d'un tableau historique de la progrès de l'esprit humain" which traced the history of the world in ten stages or epochs, the last one a picture of the happy future where the material needs of men were met and where equality prevailed within and between nations.[1] In the history of European education, Condorcet is most famous for his "Rapport et projet de décret sur l'organization générale de l'instruction publique" which he presented on behalf of the Committee of Public Instruction to the Legislative Assembly in April of 1792.[2] His plan provided a comprehensive and highly organized system of public schools designed to instruct anyone from common peasants to wealthy geniuses in institutions ranging from day schools taught in one room schoolhouses by lay teachers to sophisticated lectures on scientific subjects given in special halls by carefully trained scientists. Previous to presenting this plan, Condorcet wrote a series of mémoires detailing his ideas about what a system of schools should do for France. Entitled "Sur l'instruction publique" and published a year earlier in La Bibliothèque de l'Homme Publique, Condorcet's theoretical ideas formed the basis for the later "Rapport".[3]

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the challenges

that Condorcet saw facing France and the ways he chose to respond to those challenges, thereby posing and resolving the problems of authority deriving from the state, the family, and the wisdom of enlightened men. These challenges were primarily due to the changing nature of French society and politics and the inexperience of most French people with republican, if not democratic, forms of government. Towards meeting these challenges, Condorcet directed his several careers. His work as secretary of the Academy of Sciences, his career as a journalist, his participation in Turgot's government, his role in the Lycée in Paris and his efforts as elected representative to the Commune of Paris, the Legislative Assembly and the National Convention all indicate his concern for the educational impact of his actions. His Éloges des académiciens de l'Académie royale des sciences morts depuis l'an 1666, written while an assistant to Fouchy, serves as an excellent example of this aspect of his career academic career. His dedication to the task of creating a Constitution for France, which he saw as the most important task of his life, is another example.[4] A third one, which is not so highly emphasized, is his chairmanship of the Legislative Assembly's Committee of Public Instruction which adopted his plan for a system of public schools.[5]

Condorcet's design for a system of public schools was aimed at providing instruction for all French men, women and children in order to educate them for citizenship and prepare them for the future. Unlike most traditional eighteenth century

schools which were either small petits écoles or schools run by religious orders such as the Society of Jesus and the Oratorians,[6] Condorcet's schools were to be run by lay teachers paid by the state.[7] He wanted to exclude the church from any role in the public instruction of children or adults. The role of the state was limited also to setting the goals for the schools which Condorcet specified in his plan, and to providing the economic support for them.[8] The intellectual control over what was to be taught would be exercised by enlightened men, and the power to select teachers was divided between enlightened men and heads of households. This system enabled the French people to use the financial resources of the state while relying on the intellectual authority of enlightened men and the moral authority of the family. To understand exactly how this integration of authority was achieved, it is necessary to examine some of the details of Condorcet's plan and the specific problems it was designed to solve.

In his first mémoire, published in La Bibliothèque de l'Homme Publique and entitled "Premier mémoire:nature et objet de l'Instruction publique", Condorcet sketched the four major problems that France faced in 1791: first,how to overcome the inequality in political power, status and schooling that was preventing France from becoming a true Republic; second, how to prepare French men and women who had lived under the absolute monarchy for the demands of citizenship; third, how to spread general knowledge throughout the populace; and fourth, how to prepare the French people for the future.[9]

The answer that Condorcet provided for these problems was a publicly supported system of four levels of schools: a general level for all citizens, an advanced level for those with special talents or abilities, adult instruction for those unable to attend even a minimum amount of schooling, and a professional level for those with special interests in a specific technical career.

General instruction enabled common French peasants to learn to read, write and do simple mathematics which freed them from the bonds of the _juristes_ and lawyers who had traditionally interpreted the king's decrees and the _seigneurs'_ contracts on the land. It also taught these people enough knowledge to participate in local government as jury members, voters, and members of village councils, what today we would call elementary levels of political participation.

Advanced instruction served the purpose of developing the special talents of the gifted for the benefit of the whole population. These people would discover new knowledge as well as diffuse it throughout the population. Adult instruction enabled people who had passed school age to continue learning new ideas and to hear about the decisions of the Constituent Assembly through Sunday lectures, festivals and special holidays. Professional instruction provided both skill training and theoretical insight for artists, craftsmen, skilled tradesmen, builders, sailors, soldiers, and doctors.

On all four levels of schooling, the teaching was

carefully limited to a specific area, the area of instruction. To Condorcet, the word instruction meant both teaching specific skills, such as reading, writing, and ways of reasoning clearly, and disseminating positive knowledge and known truths about the world. The school was not allowed to infringe on the area of éducation, the moral and manual training that could be provided by a family. The distinction between instruction and éducation, which was consistently followed throughout the mémoires, indicates Condorcet's clear desire to exclude the schools from an area that he felt belonged to the family.[10] Since families alone had the the moral authority to teach the ethical and religious beliefs that they wanted their children to adopt, the school had no right to play any role in the process of éducation.[11] The state did, however, have an obligation to correct the defaults of family éducation by teaching critical thinking, a task Condorcet saw as different that teaching alternative beliefs to the ones the family had taught.

Condorcet was unwilling to let public teaching address itself to the tasks of education because then the state would have to select the moral and religious opinions that it wanted taught.[12] Condorcet, in agreement with other philosophes who criticized the moral monoply of the Gallican church, feared that this situation might lead to the establishment of certain beliefs in which case public instruction would become indoctrination. In religious matters, the state would either have to establish as many different éducations as there

were religious beliefs or require that all citizens choose from a small number of approved beliefs or demand that all citizens adopt the same belief. This dangerous practice would involve the state in an area where it did not have any authority, according to Condorcet.[13] It was not allowed to decide what should be taught or how to teach it -- those decisions were left to enlightened men, in most cases the teachers of the next highest level of schooling and at the very top, the members of learned societies.

Another reason that Condorcet was unwilling to allow the state to become involved in éducation was the impossibility of encouraging equality while teaching moral or religious beliefs. Since some children would be able to spend a great deal of time in school and others only a little, the number and quality of the moral beliefs that they could be taught would differ considerably. The disparity between the school éducations would only further intensify their social and moral inequality. In addition, the time that the school spent on éducation detracted from the time it could spend on instruction, a situation which would hinder the school from overcoming inequality of instruction.

Condorcet's limitation of the role of the state in matters of education was a way of integrating the intellectual authority of enlightened men with the moral authority of the family. He felt strongly that the authority of the family should not be challenged by the power of the state. At the

same time, the state needed to provide for its citizens a specific kind of instruction which derived its validity from the intellectual authority of enlightened men. This instruction, which covered clear thinking and the basic skills of reading, writing, mathematics, natural history, geography and logic, as designed to enable French citizens to exercise their rights as citizens.

The intellectual authority of the Enlightenment to which Condorcet deferred, was used by other educational theorists of the eighteenth century as well. La Chalotais, Turgot, and Diderot, who designed national, secular systems of schools, all relied on the power of reason and instruction.[14] Like them, Condorcet relied very heavily on the faith in man's reason and his ability to solve the problems of society through the discoveries of science. As he indicated in his "Esquisse", the future of the human race was a picture of infinite progress because the discoveries that the human mind could make were limitless. This faith in man's ability to make wise decisions was also characteristic of Condorcet's ideas about the selection of teachers.

The method that Condorcet chose for the selection of his lay teachers was a complicated one. According to Condorcet, there were three factors involved in filling a particular teaching position: the intellectual preparation of the teacher, the match between the individual and the position, and the combination of the two -- did this person meet both criteria better than any other individual.[15]

The first two issues were, for Condorcet, a matter of objective judgement which he left to experts, in this case, the self-perpetuating learned societies he wanted to establish throughout France, and the third was a matter of subjective choice which in general instruction he left to families or their representatives. At the levels of advanced and professional instruction, both the objective and subjective choices were made by the learned societies or by inspectors of studies chosen from the membership of those societies. At all levels, the decision about the selection of teachers was clearly separated into areas where different groups were given different roles because of their varying authority. The members of the learned societies possessed the intellectual authority to select a candidate on the basis of his or her qualifications while the family possessed the moral authority to decide on the actual individual because they knew the town and the children best.[16]

In this situation, Condorcet juxtaposed the intellectual authority of enlightened men with the moral authority of the family. Each had a specific realm in which they ruled supreme but the combination of the two was needed for the best process of selecting teachers. In eighteenth century France, the intellectual authority of enlightened men had played a large role in attacking the moral authority of the church and Condorcet was reluctant to let the state assume its place. As a result, the intellectual authority of enlightened men continued to be a major source for the validity of the goals for his schools.

The particular blend of moral and intellectual authority that Condorcet created differentiates him from other eighteenth century theorists. He placed a great deal of influence in the hands of families while limiting the role of the state, relying most heavily on the knowledge of enlightened men. Diderot, La Chalotais and others placed a greater influence in the hands of the state by giving the state power in determining the selection of teacher, books, and the curriculum. Most educational theorists writing in the eighteenth century also fail to make the clear distinction between éducation and instruction that Condorcet made. Yet his plan, like others, removed the church from the schools and provided a coherently organized system to meet the needs of the late eighteenth century. Working within the framework of the Enlightenment and its faith in reason and the intellectual authority of enlightened men, Condorcet drew upon the family as a new source of moral authority to replace the church. As a result, he increased the role that French men and women could play in the éducation of their children and thereby in the future of France. Unfortunately, however, this solution to the problems of creating a new France was not adopted; during the course of the Revolution, the National Convention adopted other conceptions of maral authority and replaced the church with the state, thereby depriving French men and women of the influence that Condorcet had given to them.

footnotes

1. Condorcet, "Esquisse d'un tableau historique de la progrès de l'esprit humain" Oeuvres de Condorcet, eds. M.F. Arago and A. Condorcet O'Connor, 12 vols. (Paris: Didot, 1847-1849), VI, 11-276.

2. Archives parlementaires, 1ère series, XLII, 192-195 & 227-245, session of April 20, 1792.

3. La Bibliothèque de l'Homme Publique, vols. 13,14,15,21.

4. Jacob Salwyn Schapiro, Condorcet and the Rise of Liberalism (New York: Octagon, 1963), pp. 99-102.

5. Procès-Verbaux de Comité d'Instruction Publique de l'Assemblée Législative, M. J. Guillaume, ed. (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1889), pp. 121-122, session of February 20, 1792.

6. For more information on eighteenth century French elementary schools, see Maurice Gontard, "L'Enseignement Primaire en France de la Révolution a la loi Guizot (1789-1833)" Annales de l'Université de Lyon (Lettres) III,3 (Paris: Société d'Édition "Les Belles Lettres", 1959).

7. This idea was not new; Rolland, La Chalotais, Turgot and others had also proposed state schools.

8. "La puissance publique doit donc, après avoir fixé l'objet et l'étendue de chaque instruction, s'assurer qu'à chaque époque le choix des maîtres et celui des livres ou des méthodes sera d'accord avec la raison des hommes éclairés et d'abandonner le reste à leur influence." Condorcet, "Premier Mémoire" Oeuvres de Condorcet, VII, 211.

9. Condorcet, "Premier Mémoire", Oeuvres de Condorcet, VII, 169-228, passim.

10. Although this distinction is now a normal part of the French language, Condorcet was the first philosophe to use the distinction to clarify his ideas. Condorcet may even have been the first Frenchman to make such a clear distinction. "The 'Philosophes' and Public Education" Yale French Studies, no. 40 (1968), 74. Frenchmen before 1885 used the word nourriture, not éducation. E. Littré, Dictionnaire de la langue française (Paris: Hachette, 1885), II, 1303.

11. In company with Voltaire and other philosophes, who also desired to decrease the role of the church and laicize the schools, Condorcet wanted ethical and moral teaching left to the family.

12. Here Condorcet opposed Turgot, La Chalotais, and Rolland by insisting that the state had no right to teach any credo, belief or philosophic maxim. The only person who could choose his beliefs was the child himself or his family. Francique Vial, Condorcet et l'éducation démocratique (Paris: Delaplane, 1903), p. 28.

13. In this stand, Condorcet directly contradicted many of the philosophes such as d'Holbach in La Politique Naturelle and Rousseau in Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne who insisted on the role of the state in some kind of ethical and moral training. Rousseau in Émile felt, however, that the best education was family education with the mother as nurse and the father as teacher.

14. One major difference was Condorcet's interest in instructing all people through both general and adult instruction. Many theorists did not want to move the common folk from their place in society. La Chalotais, for example, prescribed hard work for children and limited advanced instruction to selected children over the age of ten. La Chalotais, "Essay

on National Education" ed. and trans. F. de la Fontainerie, French Liberalism in the Eighteenth Century (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1932), p. 97.

15. Condorcet, "Second Mémoire" Oeuvres de Condorcet, VII,292.

16. Ibid., VII, 309.